

Senior Rabbi's Report  
Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer  
Judea Reform Congregation Annual Meeting  
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Dear Friends:

I had a report. Drafted and revised on Thursday, in time for Shabbat, I had a report. However, if, as Martin Buber taught, "All real living is Meeting," then - *al achat kama v'chama*- all the more so does our Annual Meeting deserve a rabbinic report and reflects "real living."

In the Midrash we read of the first Meeting between God and *adam*, "the human being." At the end of that first day of human existence, *adam* sees the glowing sun beginning to disappear along the horizon-- the sky growing dimmer and dimmer until he cannot see. Assuming this is the end, all he can do is grieve and mourn, thinking it was his fault, his sin. The midrash teaches that he awoke the next day, saw the sun rise and felt such relief. He said, "this is the way of the world."

Yesterday as Shabbat ended, one could feel the lament of *adam*, seeing the fury in the streets of our nation--the outrage, the abuse, the tears from the guts of our brothers and sisters, and from the teargas cans of law enforcement. Would that we all could fully sense the grief and mourning, the spiritual exasperation and fury, within the hearts of people of color. Living in a nation that continues to use law enforcement as slavery enforcement, the grieving and mourning is worse than that of *adam* in our midrash. Because we awoke this morning to find it's still night. Today, as we meet, protests and riots continue.

Also, most of us cannot fully fathom the dread and inner-conflict among those human beings in law enforcement who seek only to do good. The Prophets remind us that pursuing justice demands *seeking* righteousness, walking with a humble and wise heart-- especially in times of tumult, when our bodies and our body politic are *so gravely sick*.

There is no such thing as "business as usual," there is only business. And we are conducting business. I had a report. But I will never deliver a report disabused of "real living," for the simple reason that the Judaism that we *live* in Judea Reform Congregation *lives* in reality. Our tradition does not exist for its own sake; rather, it is through Judaism, in its most authentic form, that we exist in order to improve the human condition.

This doesn't diminish all what we lift up and cherish in this meeting. It sanctifies our business; it magnifies our mission. Despite all seeming contradictions, we know that our tears of sorrow and pain draw from the same tear ducts as do laughter and joy.

Our songs of lament and protest draw from the same lungs and air as those of celebration and gladness.

I had a report. But a real report, an honest report must respond to the first question posed to *adam* in the garden, God's eternal question, always in the present tense: *Ayeka*, "where are you?"

We are in the Wilderness.

Our High School seniors taught us this much last Shabbat. In the Wilderness, *leadership is tested*. There are no rehearsals; no predictability, and no certainty that every decision will be "correct." In the Wilderness, *leaders lead*.

In this Wilderness, the leaders of this congregation--lay leadership on all levels and our staff are shaping our story in ways that I believe, are no less sacred than the leadership of Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and all those leaders *B'midbar Sinai*, in the Wilderness of Sinai.

Our President Ziva Raney is modeling what it means to be our President. With integrity, wisdom, and courage, she never loses sight of our mission, of the "Why" of Judea Reform Congregation. She intuits that - in the words Megilat Esther- "for moments such as this"- we have a synagogue community. Without Ziva's leadership we simply would not have the Torah as close to us as we do now.

Emily Young's leadership is a gift beyond measure. She brings to the job of Executive Director, a spirit that is reflective, wise, collaborative, and compassionate. It's not hard to teach Torah; it is an ultimate challenge *be Torah*, to operationalize our values, not as *text* but as *texture*. That is Emily's gift.

Working with Ziva and Emily is the Torah that sustains me personally, but above all sustains this community in countless ways, seen and unseen. I couldn't ask for better partners in the sacred work of reporting on the question, *Ayeka*, "where are you?"

The Talmud teaches: *da mei-ayin bata, ul'ain atah holech, v'lifnei mi atah atid leitein din v'cheshbon*, "know where you come from, where you are going, and before whom you will stand in judgement and give a report." (Avot 3:1)

***Da mei'ayin bata, "know from where you come."***

The difference between now and a year ago is that, now, we share a bit of the past. We share a year of meetings-- dozens of group gatherings in the beginning months, meeting hundreds and hundreds of our community members. Numbers do matter, so here are some more numbers:

We've shared and created more than 40 Shabbatot; We've read from all Five Books; We've shared all Jewish holidays; twenty-two B'nai Mitzvah students; a dozen

conversion students; many other life cycle gatherings, from weddings and baby namings to funerals, unveilings & shiva minyanim; other rituals marking major life transitions. Many of these numbers this year were greater than a typical year, given the realities of rabbinic transition, and the realities of our growth.

*Da Mei-ayin bata*, this reminder to look back is a challenge in this Wilderness; it requires a “report” of sorts, a gathering of memory. And we will always remember how many of these rituals have been disrupted by the pandemic. Our families have suffered in various ways, and varying degrees, from the extremely inconvenient to unspeakably painful. Ten weeks ago seems like a world apart because *it was*. One week ago seems like a world apart because *it was*.

Yet,, we know that our story is not one of suffering; it’s one of resilience. We have lived that too. Many of our B’nai Mitzvah have lived that, adapted, and still felt joy. Our mourners have lived that and, somehow, from this community they have felt comfort. They have felt that while we cannot fully comprehend their grief, we love them.

***L’an atah holeich, “know where you are going.”***

where we are going, everyone wants to know. In this Wilderness we will fight this pandemic wisely--as our President Ziva said, with science and values. We know that *how* we move forward as a society will determine where we are going in critical ways.

As your Rabbi I stand in solidarity with 42 clergy colleagues in Durham, declaring our utmost obligation. *Kedusha*-holiness means that “our obligation to promote public health during this pandemic is part and parcel of our core beliefs, inextricable with what God demands of us.”

Today countless Houses of Worship are gathering in large numbers, indoors, without critical safety measures; rebuking the public health advice of experts. These Houses of Worship are endangering lives, especially the elderly, the sick, the poor, the immigrants, the communities of color whom we know are hit most hard by this pandemic. As Ziva mentioned, all of our decisions are informed by Torah and expert advice from our Health Advisory Team.

*L’an atah holech*, and in our pathway through this we are going to *live our Judaism* more fiercely because of the Wilderness. We’re praying in greater numbers *because of the Wilderness*. We’re studying in greater numbers *because of the Wilderness*. (Right now, by the way, we’re planning our Levin-Moscovitz lecture series in June). This community is practicing *more mitzvot*, not less-- *because the Wilderness demands nothing less*. Our People was- and *is*- created in the Wilderness.

*L’an atah holech*, “where we are going” will be a powerful response to the final piece of our the Talmudic verse:

**“Know before whom you will stand in judgement and give a report.”**

We will be judged by future generations. How we lead, how we adapt, how we reform *intentional Jewish living*, how we cling to Torah, even when distant from the scroll itself: *this* will be the report, the story of the Wilderness they will hear and tell. The stories we tell are never about the predictable, the replicable, the easy. They are always about *how we lead through the Wilderness*.

I’m honored to be the Senior Rabbi of a Congregation that is “gifting” to future generations a story of resilience, vitality, and, above all, devotion to humanity. Our embrace is broad enough to encompass all of creation. Our creativity will ensure that we are enlivening this tradition, day by day, phase by phase.

We do not know for certain where we are going, but we know-- with memory and vision, from life cycle events and holidays, from Shabbat to Shabbat to Shabbat, and yes- to the High Holy Days. We will figure this out, step by step, in radically amazing ways.

I have no doubt in my mind whatsoever that our congregation will *make life better* for our members, and *make life holier* for everyone we can reach. Because that is *our Judaism*.

Looking back, looking ahead, and with Torah in our midst, we will move forward, with the blessings spoken in the Wilderness, in this week’s Torah portion:

May God bless us and keep us safe,  
May God’s light shine on us with kindness,  
May God’s presence be with us, and through our actions, may we bring about the blessings of Shalom, of Wellness, of Peace.

Amen.

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